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ABSTRACT

Children's sociodramatic play is very much associated with their growing ability to use symbols for a variety of functional purposes external to the symbols themselves. Defining such play as "voluntary social role-playing involving two or more children," this paper draws on research on sociodramatic play to: (1) discuss the nature of sociodramatic play and its function in relation to children's overall cognitive development; (2) elaborate on how children's sociodramatic play relates to their language development; and (3) propose a framework for enhancing children's language development through strategic instructional intervention. (Contains 21 references.) (EV)

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Piaget (1951), as cited in Christie (1982), classified play into three different categories corresponding to different stages of cognitive development: practice play, which dominates the sensorimotor stage (from birth to approximately 2 years of age); symbolic play, that becomes prominent during the preoperational stage (from age 2 to 7), and games with rules, which comes into prominence during the concrete operational stage (age 7 to 11). Within this system, sociodramatic play falls under the symbolic play.

As the category "symbolic" suggests, sociodramatic play is very much associated with children's growing ability to use symbols for a variety of functional purposes external to the symbols themselves: e.g., to represent object absent from immediate physical context, to construct imagined social realities and regulate communicative events typically happening in certain contexts, etc. Given this, Frost & Klein (1979) classify sociodramatic play as the most highly developed form of symbolic play, which represents a precursor of children's cognitive, social, and communicative-competence development.

This paper will (a) discuss the nature of sociodramatic play and its function in relation to the children's overall, cognitive development, (b) elaborate on how children's sociodramatic play relates to their language development, and (c) propose a framework for enhancing children's language development through strategic instructional intervention.

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SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

In this paper, sociodramatic play-- which some researchers and expert writers variously call "social fantasy play," "social imaginative play," "social make-believe play," and "social pretend play"-- is used to refer to "voluntary social role-taking involving two or more children" (Levy et al., 1986, p.134), an engagement where the children transform activities from their real objective and objects from their real counterparts" (McCune-Nicolich, 1981 cited in Farver, 1992, p.504).

Christie (1980), quoting Piaget and Vygotsky, contends that symbolic play, which represents a generic class under which sociodramatic play falls, is a prerequisite for the development of abstract, logical thought-- the uniquely human capability which enables human being to do higher order thinking such as those cognitive operations employed in learning science, mathematics and other concept formation in all areas of knowledge.

More specifically, recent research in early literacy and peer culture suggests that sociodramatic play is of special importance to the development of children's social as well as language learning, as its symbolic, abstract, social nature is compatible with the cognitive operations in literacy behavior in a literate society of today (e.g., Benson, 1993; Christie, 1980; Kantor, Elgas, & Fernie, 1993; Pallegrini, DeStefano, & Thompson, 1983; Roskos, 1988).

SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

As suggested in the definition of the sociodramatic play above, essential in the sociodramatic play are two elements: role taking and verbal communication. In sociodramatic play, children attempt to communicate and integrate their everyday conventional or reconstructed knowledge of the (social) world with that of their partners (Garvey, 1990; Farver, 1992). In terms of linguistic production the "pretenders," just by virtue of their involvement in this sociodramatic play, are required to engage in two forms of communication: communication about the play ("meta communication") when--while retaining their own real-life identities-- the pretenders negotiate the roles and scene (or "script") to be enacted, and communication which is held within the play mode, where the children relate to one another in the roles they have agreed to perform (Fein, 1979, citing Garvey & Berndt, 1977).

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In her recent experimental study which attempted to capture the developmental trends in young children's use of communicative strategies to structure and create shared meaning in spontaneous sociodramatic play, Ferver (1992) found some evidence of the progression in complexity of the communicative strategy used by the children aged 2, 3, 4 and 5 years participating in the study. More specifically, the 2-year-olds tended to rely on calls for attention to initiate play and relied on paralinguistic cues to animate objects and to signify their intention to play. They used repetition of their partners' assertions (which are usually short and tied to the physical properties of play objects) and actions to establish common reference and to acknowledge the partners' contributions. The three-year old children pretenders, while still relying on paralinguistic cues, began to employ deliberate intonation variations to signify role enactment and repetitions to signal script agreement, and they also started using semantic ties (which are characteristic of the 4- and 5-year olds' communicative strategies) to expand on their partners' utterances. Unlike their younger fellow pretenders who tended to heavily rely on paralinguistic cues and repetitions, the five year olds used descriptions of actions, semantic ties, and directives to establish and coordinate long sequences of complex sociodramatic play.

Perhaps parallel with the development of social play from onlooking behavior to solitary, parallel, and associative play and finally cooperative play at its most complex level (Parten, 1932), (socio)linguistic competence of the pretenders develop with the wealth of their life experience and linguistic repertoire (Genishi, 1988). That is to say that varied sociodramatic play experiences can enhance young children's developing linguistic, social and cognitive skills (Pellegrini, DeStefano, & Thompson, 1983; Dyson, 1990, 1991; Nourot & Hoorn, 1991)

ENHANCING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

In his article entitled "Play, Thought, and Language", Bruner (1983) posits that (first) language is "most rapidly mastered when situated in playful activity" (p.65), as the playfulness allows for opportunities to try out different ways in which the language acquirer can combine the elements of the language without having to worry too much about the consequences of making errors. Given this thinking, it

seems safe to assume that the sociodramatic play context is conducive to language acquisition.

If recent research has just begun to offer insights into the ways children benefit from play in general and sociodramatic play in particular, the research has also to offer insights into how adults can enhance play to optimize some particular benefits. Research in literacy instruction has clearly indicated that children learn what they are taught (Allington, 1994); the same seems to hold true also for the sociodramatic play. According to Christie (1982), for instance, Smilansky's (1968) study in Israel, where she used several training procedures to teach Israeli children from low SES background the skills needed to engage in sociodramatic play , has shown that the training significantly improve the quality of children's play.

INTERVENTION

Nourot & Hoorn (1991) define "intervention" as "everything the teacher does" (p.46) to influence children's play. Intervention, they say, can be thought of on a continuum from more indirect to more direct. Parallel with this definition, strategic intervention can take several forms: play training; establishing common experience; provision of play objects and props; time management; provision of adequate space specially designed for play.

Play training

Following the lead proposed by Smilansky (1968), Christie (1982) has differentiated two types of sociodramatic play training: outside intervention and inside intervention. In outside intervention, when giving support to the children's sociodramatic enactment, the teacher remains outside of the play. As an outsider, the teacher may do the following: setting the environment,;suggesting a theme and/or role assignment; helping some children gain access to play without violating the rights of the players in an on-going episode; helping particular children play with one another; suggesting new variations to enrich children's play; encouraging children to extend their play, etc.

While outside intervention allows the teacher the role as a supporting outsider, inside intervention requires the teacher to directly

involve in children's play. As a participant in the play, the teacher can take a very strategic role here: as a model. While serving as a participant the teacher can suggest-- without disturbing the natural ecology of the play-- some challenging theme that would likely elicit the rest of the players to engage in productive verbal exchanges and other form of literate behavior. As a more mature, experienced member of the culture, the teacher can also provide a good model-- within the limit of her role enactment-- as to how a participant of sociodramatic play can improvise and explore a wide range of possibilities. In this way, the teacher can enrich the sociodramatic play in an unobtrusive way.

Developing commonly shared background experiences

Research has suggested that life experience serves as a source for children's sociodramatic play (e.g., Garvey, 1990; Levy et al., 1992). Given this generalization, some deliberate arrangement needs to be made so that children get the opportunities to experientially learn from real (social) life, such as going to a grocery store, hospital, fast-food restaurant, etc. Using those real (social) life experiences as a basis for development of themes and topics of sociodramatic play, the teacher can "incorporate" literacy acts and artifacts as natural part of sociodramatic play. For instance, before going to a grocery store, children might be asked to generate a shopping list, estimating the prices, and counting the money they need to bring with them, etc.

To reinforce the acquisition of the experiential knowledge, following the trips, the teacher can encourage the children to relive and reconstruct their experiences through sociodramatic play. By sharing and building on their prior knowledge in collaborative sociodramatic play, children develop the skill of constructing systems of meaning which are jointly understood (Ferver, 1992).

By participating in theme-related activities, the children can develop a shared experience base which, in turn, will enrich the variations and enhance the quality of their sociodramatic play.

Provision of play objects and props

It has generally been acknowledged that the availability of certain play objects and props will, to some extent, determine in what kind of play children will get themselves involved. An empirical study by Neuman

& Roskos (1990), which examined the effects of literacy-enriched play centers on children's literacy demonstration, has shown that sociodramatic play in the place where literacy acts and artifacts are made available and readily accessible to children is dominated by literacy demonstrations. That is to say that the teacher can enrich children's sociodramatic play for the promotion of literacy by providing sufficient, functional, relevant literacy-promoting play objects and props such as stationary and envelopes, mail boxes, stamps, appointment books, assorted forms, etc. Provision of "prop boxes" (Mayhre, 1993), will be of great help here.

Time management

Large blocks of time for play needs to be allotted to ensure that the children can develop their play to the limit of their imagination. Research by Christie & Wardle (1992) has clearly demonstrated that longer play periods encourage children to engage in higher social and cognitive forms of play because with large time-blocks allotments enable the children to recruit fellow players and to engage in negotiations necessary for sociodramatic play. Time management such as this one can result in an increase group play in general and group-dynamics in particular which will necessitate the players to engage in extensive and intensive verbal exchanges.

Provision of adequate space

Like adults, when making sense of new experience children refer to real life experience. Consistent with this "theory," to promote children's literacy behavior in multiple settings the teacher needs to provide the children with adequate space. In Neuman & Roskos (1992) study, for instance, to elicit children's "literacy demonstrations" the researchers provided the children participants with four distinct play centers (Post Office, Library, Office, and Kitchen), resembling activities and physical settings familiar to the children. As can easily be predicted, those various literacy supports did enhance children's literacy acts.

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SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS

From the discussion in the foregoing sections, it is clear that language, sociodramatic play, and learning have a complex relationship. Sociodramatic play context provides unique opportunities for young children to become adept at communicating their ideas.

As in many other dimensions of children's life, there is a room for teacher's intervention to enhance the development. In this case, in order to promote children's literacy development through sociodramatic play, the teacher can give support in a number of ways, which basically can be summarized in three principles: demonstration, engagement, and encouragement.

Demonstrations

Children learn from social interaction. They learn form social practice. It follows that they learning process will be facilitated when the teacher provides "concrete" demonstrations of what are expected of the children.

Engagement

Engagement is vital for all kind of learning. Given this theory, the teacher needs to make sure that the children get engaged in the sociodramatic play they are enacting. To ensure "genuine" engagement, the children should be given the freedom to choose in whatever they are doing and/or using.

Encouragement

Sociodramatic play is a creative enterprise, which presupposes great motivation. To ensure this, the teacher--in all her roles both in the play mode or outside it-- should make efforts to encourage the children to take risks and explore possibilities. In this way, the children can acquire new linguistic skills to convey and negotiate meaning beyond their existing repertoires.

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